

The Fourth Church Pulpit

A Lenten Series: Love to the Loveless
That They Might Lovely Be

A WOMAN THIRSTING FOR LIFE

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FOURTH
PRESBY
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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“... give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty”
John 4:15 (NRSV)

One warm summer evening, sitting on a front porch sipping iced tea, we were visiting with Fannie Montgomery Kearney, my wife's grandmother. She was in her mid-nineties; born in Ireland; came to this country when she was a young woman to marry her sweetheart, Matthew. She had borne and raised five sons and a daughter; had returned to Ireland just once, seventy years before, and it occurred to us that she was a treasure and we wanted and needed to know as much about her life as we could persuade her to tell, which was not easy, by the way. She never could quite understand why we were interested. And, besides, the older she became the more prominently her lilting brogue dominated her speech so that you had to listen very carefully.

“What was life like in Ireland?” we asked. “What did you do all day?”

“Well,” she said, “the men and boys worked in the field, cutting turf, planting spuds. The women and girls cooked and kept house.”

“How did you meet Grandfather?” we asked. He had died years before.

“There was a well between Creeslough where the Kearney farm is and Ballymore where the Montgomerys lived and every evening the girls were sent to the well to bring back buckets of water. The young men and boys were always there too. That's where I met Matthew. We courted at the well.”

When Grandfather Kearney came to America and went to work for the railroad he sent for her, and Fannie came across the ocean alone at the age of twenty, and they were married. But it started at a well, in the evening when the young women came to get water and the young men were there.

Things like that have been happening at the well for several thousand years, it turns out.

Isaac, Jacob and Moses all found their wives at wells. Jacob's story is surely one of the most romantic vignettes in Scripture. He's out tending his flocks, and comes to a well. It's too early in the day to water the animals so Jacob is waiting essentially for the well to be opened at the normal time, when who should appear but a beautiful young woman named Rachel. The effect is electric. Jacob, personally opens the well for her and with obvious chivalry waters Rachel's flocks, and then things get very interesting. “Jacob kissed Rachel, and wept aloud” and Rebekah runs and tells her father who runs out to meet Jacob and embraces and kisses him, and it doesn't say so, but I imagine they were all crying and laughing and hugging and kissing at the well.

So you could say that when his friends came back from running an errand and find Jesus sitting at a well sharing a cup of water and conversing with a woman from a nearby town, they are shocked because in their culture this is a very romantic and matrimonially promising situation.

“I was walking along minding my business,
When out of a orange colored sky,
Flash, bam, alakazam. . .
wonderful you walked by!” — as Natalie Cole puts it.

. . . Except for the fact that this was no innocent Jewish maiden, appropriate for romancing. This is a very complex woman who, it turns out, has been married five times, is now living with a sixth man and, worst of all, was a Samaritan.

Annie Dillard says somewhere that Sunday School Bible stories are full of simple, uncomplicated "water color figures," but when you look at them from the perspective of adulthood, they become as complicated, fragmented, exhausted and sinful as the rest of us. There is a wonderful collection of them in the Fourth Gospel, a microcosm of humankind, a gallery of "almost saints" who sound strikingly familiar . . . Nicodemus, the responsible community leader coming to Jesus after dark, a man who has been lying on his mat beside a pool for thirty-eight years waiting for healing, a woman caught in adultery and about to be stoned, a blind man, a man who dies too soon, Judas and Peter and Mary Magdalene. One scholar observes that the author is either one of the best fictional character writers in the history of literature or else he's simply describing what he saw. Each story is as complicated as every life becomes sooner or later. Each life in each story is, in some way, loveless and because of Jesus touched by love in a way that recreates and rebirths life and the future. Each of those lives becomes a thing of hope and of beauty.

The story begins with Jesus and friends leaving Judea, heading back to Galilee — where they lived - and taking a detour into Samaria. The text says, "He had to go through Samaria." But you don't have to go through Samaria geographically. In fact, you have to go out of your way.

In point of fact, Samaria was a despicable place according to Jewish custom, and Samaritans were despicable people — all of them . . . it was their genes, their race, their religion. It went back to an incident that had occurred 700 years in the past.

And it had to do with racial mixing . . . Jews thought Samaritans were half-breeds. And it had to do with a religious fight over whose Temple was the right Temple and whose religion — both Semitic, both Hebrew — was God's favorite. It starts to sound familiar, doesn't it? Out of this recognizable human matrix comes a virulent and cruel racism: "Those people are lazy; they smell funny . . . don't keep themselves very clean. You can't trust them; they're not dependable." Raymond M. Brown, the definitive scholar of the Fourth Gospel reports that there was a "Jewish" regulation around 65 A. D. which warned that one could never count on the ritual purity of Samaritan women since they were menstruants from the cradle.
[*The Anchor Bible, John*, Volume 1, p. 170, Raymond M. Brown]

There's more, and let's allow a woman theologian to tell us about it. Dr. Letty Russell of Yale Divinity School says the Samaritan woman was a marginal person in an already marginalized culture. Jews regarded all Samaritans as inferior. Jewish culture regarded women as "not-quite-human," Russell says. And, in addition to all that, this woman is flagrantly immoral. Jewish law allowed three marriages. She has been married five times and is living with number six. Letty Russell says, "She has three strikes against her. She is foreign, fallen and female." [*Becoming Human*, p. 23]

And now we know what she's doing at the well at noon, the sixth hour, the full heat of day. Women go to the well at dusk, or early morning, never in the heat of the day. Unless, for some reason, you can't go to the well when everybody else does. Unless who you are and what you have done renders you unfit for proper and polite company. Unless going in the evening subjects you to the sneers and insults of your sisters and the unwelcome and uninvited sexual harassment of young men who assume you must be easy.

This is who Jesus meets and engages in conversation. He asks for a drink and she, understandably, is surprised. Jewish men don't ask Samaritan women, any women, for a drink, particularly at a well in broad daylight.

The repartee has a kind of charm:

"I'm thirsty," says he.

"Funny, you, a Jew, should be asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink," says she.

"If you knew who you were talking to you'd be asking me for water, living water," he says.

"You don't even have a cup to drink from," she says.

"If you drink living water you will never thirst" he says.

"So, give me this water," she says.

They banter about the well, their religion, and Jesus asks about her marital status. She lies about it but somehow he already knows and she, overcome by his perception and, I think, by his kindness and acceptance, concludes that she is talking to a holy man.

The disciples enter at this point, consider chiding him for speaking with her. The woman runs back to town and tells the townspeople about Jesus and many Samaritans, John reports, "believed in him because of the woman's testimony." End of the story.

This story is, first of all, about exclusiveness, racial and religious prejudice; a fairly germane topic I'd say in the wake of a devout fundamentalist Christian shooting and killing a physician, in Pensacola, Florida, after escalating violence aimed at women's clinics that provide legal abortions, stirred up by and planned by groups claiming to be religious — Christian. And Muslim fundamentalism, apparently behind or implicated in bombing the World Trade Center, and Israeli soldiers shooting a Palestinian seventeen-year-old in the back, and Islamic fundamentalists attacking tourists and Coptic Christians in Egypt and themselves hunted down and shot, and in Waco, those pathetic fundamentalists huddled in their compound, pouring over Scripture, seeing the F.B.I. and A.T.F. agents as agents of the anti-Christ as specifically defined by the Book of Revelation. It is germane, is it not, our Lord's intentional expedition into Samaria?

Professor Russell describes the sociology of exclusion:

"We maintain our identity 'over against' other groups," she says, "and the less sure you are the more you must have an 'other' to be 'over against.' Persons and groups who are anxious about whether they will measure up to the cultural standards of superiority usually cut others down to their size." [p. 23, *op. cit.*]

So the simple fact, and it would be funny if it did not turn out violently, is that racism is a character flaw, a personality deficit — in the racist. And the most verbal anti-gay is, we know, homophobic, unsure and uncertain of his own or her own sexuality. And the exclusive Christian who builds walls and barriers to keep "them" out — whoever they are, who transforms the people with whom he/she differs theologically, into the enemy — has simply missed the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Christian Gospel, particularly as it is appropriated in these wonderful stories, is radically inclusive, radically willing to let God be the final judge of people's personal morality and doctrinal orthodoxy — in order to get through to them with something of the good news of God's love.

"God doesn't seem to care when the word needs to get out," Letty Russell quips. God doesn't care who the woman is or how many men she has married . . . God doesn't seem to care much about all these matters that obsess religious folk.

So the first thing her story is about is God's welcome, God's hospitality, the open arms of God, the amazing grace of the one who creates us and nurtures us and loves us on our way. And the second word, I think, is a word of caution about being too quick to exclude people on the basis of moral judgments, even if they are made in the name of God.

This woman is flagrantly immoral — nobody argues the fact — openly disrespectful of the religious law, ancient custom and certainly the standards of polite society. Jesus accepts her as she is, doesn't scold or condemn her, offers her instead living water, and the story ends with a new beginning for her and her neighbors.

It is not a topic we find easy to discuss, but our culture is currently trying to decide how to relate to a group of people who have been on the outside for a long time, gay and lesbian people whose orientation until recently has been defined as abnormal and whose sexual behavior has been regarded as immoral and illegal. Now we are struggling to decide whether it is legal to refuse a job or housing to a person on the basis of sexual orientation; or whether sexual orientation has anything to do with fitness for military service, and whether or not homosexual persons may be ordained; and in our Presbyterian system, whether churches have a right to call ministers with no regard to their sexual orientation. Part of the difficulty we have talking about this is that the participants in the discussion already know the truth, and when you already know the truth there is no room to negotiate or compromise. And so dialogue becomes prosecution of your position. And to make matters even more complicated for the church, including our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), there are those of us who are willing — while we continue to study Scripture and listen to science — willing to not inquire as to sexual orientation, to respect privacy and dignity and to allow churches to call whomever they want to call to leadership. But there are many within the system who cannot say that, and who feel that God's truth and the authority of Scripture are so clear on this matter that they threaten to leave, to pull out of the family if the other view prevails. So it is very complicated and if you care about the health and viability of the mainline churches, all of them, in this culture, you may wish to pray about this whole matter. And pray as well that if the followers of Jesus err in this matter, we err on the side of inclusiveness and not exclusiveness: that if we must be guilty - it be of too much understanding and acceptance, and not too little.

Her story is, of course, finally about water . . . human need for water . . . water to slake thirst and make deserts bloom — water to cleanse and heal and baptize. My favorite baptism story, and there are a lot of wonderful ones accumulated over the years, happened right here several years ago. The little boy was a talkative two and quite an armful. At two, veteran ministers know to take the child in arm only if he seems willing. This boy was, climbed on board, sat in my arm, seriously watching the proceedings, looking at the font, pondering what was happening on his head. And as I was handing him back to his parents he said — and I swear he leaned into the microphone and announced with clarity and accuracy — “Water.”

We can only imagine the power of water as a metaphor in a desert land. In the wilderness God's presence and blessing is no more eloquently conveyed than by water from the rock.

Whatever Jesus meant when he offered the woman “living water,” all the scholars agree that it was the one thing necessary for life — full, abundant, complete — what the Fourth Gospel calls eternal life. And everybody agrees that what living water is — what the essential thing is — is whatever Jesus was — namely an expression of God's love.

And that is what this woman's story is about — a practical, down-to-earth love which expressed itself not in gorgeous sonnets or beautiful flowers, but in a man sitting down and talking in the middle of the day, and in that act of simple acceptance, cutting through 700 years of racist exclusiveness, and thousands of years — fore and aft — of moral arrogance and religious intolerance.

Sometimes a reminder is all we need . . . that we are each of us, beloved children of God: that there is one who loves even though there seems to be no one else. It's what church is about, a reminder that each individual is loved by God, a conscious, sometimes faltering, halting, sometimes silly and superficial attempt to say to the world — “there is another way, and it is God's way. It doesn't care about skin color, or life style, or economics or sexual orientation, or ideology, or political correctness . . . a way characterized by Jesus.”

That's what church is about, and in a world where the word "church" is used for the people in Waco who have killed for their truth, and the group like the one in Pensacola that gathers to encourage one another to do violence and ends up killing a physician. That's not church . . . that doesn't have anything to do with Jesus. In this world there is a need for churches willing to say no to that and to express an alternative word.

When I received the February edition of our Tutoring Program's Newsletter, I received that alternative word. I was struck by its eloquence and we have reproduced part of it for you to see and I enter it as exhibit A to document how lovely children are who know, even in a very minimal way, that they are loved and cared about.

So the woman — the Samaritan woman who had been married five times and was living with number six — the woman picked up her skirts and ran home to tell about him. Dorothy Sayers quipped,

"No wonder that women were first at the cradle and last at the cross. They had never seen a man like this man." [Russell, p. 23]

She was on the margins . . . outcast . . . unfit for polite company . . . and it didn't seem to matter to him. He sat and talked with her . . . didn't condemn, but took her seriously.

"Love to the loveless."

She is lovely —running down the road to the village. She has become lovely — in the love and acceptance and amazing grace of this man — Jesus the Christ — living water.

All praise to him.